

Summary of discussions in Bangkok, May 1982

Jonothan and I had several themes of areas in daily life which we discussed with Khun Sujin and to a lesser extent with other friends on this trip. Of course one knows deep down that what we see as conventional problems are in fact rooted in our own kilesa or defilements. Somehow we seem to manage to go on saying this and-at the same time to put off really facing up to them, the kilesa, when they arise. Sometimes we seem to almost use the fact that it's our conditioned tendencies as an excuse to not see the urgency of giving up 'our' kilesa or to see the value of kusala or wholesomeness which should be developed instead.

Sometimes in a new 'situation', certain kilesa become more apparent. For example, we discussed the problems of different 'roles' and expectations in married life, learning to compromise and finding a balance between giving up certain things in one's life to suit the other and doing what one is happy with. We also discussed areas such as family and friends who might like more of our time than we feel we can spare. I'd felt torn in many directions in trying to work hard for a busy course of study, keep Jonothan happy, help organise the basic comforts for a new home, spend time with his family and friends and continue dhamma studies and contact with family and friends in England and elsewhere. Most of the time I'd not coped very well at all and felt quite unhappy as a result.

I have just listened to part of a tape which I made during our final discussion with Khun Sujin. She is emphasising how 'it's not just understanding the problem, but understanding one's kilesa which conditions that problem.... otherwise the understanding is very superficial; because the root is not the problem itself, but one's own lack of understanding and one's own kilesa...' When we talked about the problems I found in certain social situations, when perhaps the conversation seemed uninteresting and I was wishing for another situation, Khun Sujin emphasised the importance of mettā. We've heard so much about mettā and how its characteristic is that it is the quality of loving kindness to all, to anyone we can help at the present moment. Yet we seem to forget and need to be reminded over and over again.

Khun Sujin kept asking me, when I said I tended to think a lot about family and friends a long way off, 'what about the people around one now?'. One has to be reminded that one can help in different ways at different times. When I suggested that I often thought my time could be spent more usefully if I was helping those interested in understanding their lives better, she asked me whether if two people were drowning, one could say the life of one who was a Dhamma friend was worth saving more than the other unknown person. I don't find this an easy question!

When there is a little mettā to those around, one can see how much more happily or easily one's life begins to run and how we can see others as friends at such times (however unknown to us they may be), instead of looking critically towards them. It was also pointed out to us that the development of mettā leads to the development of the other brahma viharas. Jonothan has said a lot more on a tape on this subject area which perhaps we will transcribe and add to.

One of the areas we discussed was the difficulty in frequent social contact, in situations involving many people. Khun Sujin referred frequently to the 'guests through six doorways'. She reminded us that there are uninvited guests all the time, whatever the situation, and

that we should learn to be more accepting and tolerant of whatever 'quest' there is (in this absolute sense) in whatever situation we find ourselves with more understanding. We had some discussion about our thinking and fears. Although we understand there are no rules with regard to situation as far as the arising of sati is concerned, still we cling a lot to what we think will be the useful conditions in a situational sense for its arising and we fear what will happen if we have no opportunity for discussion, reading or study.

Sometimes I find there is so much thinking about this area that when there is the opportunity to pick up a book or discuss something useful with someone, I'm either exhausted or there's too much aversion to be of any help. When there's no understanding, there's no confidence in the value of kusala and especially of a moment of sati now, which is of course what will take care of the development of more sati in the future.

Alan described a new phrase which he uses to describe one aspect of lobha or attachment. He uses the phrase 'being used to' to describe how we take for granted the familiar objects in our lives in a conventional sense, in terms of familiar places and people and situations and also the absolute realities through different doorways which are actually experienced. We enjoy familiar sights and sounds and feel that the carpet has been removed from under our feet when these seem different and when it appears that we are in a different situation. Khun Sujin reminded me that 'Adelaide' was only nama and rupa. She was discussing different conditions with us in order to help us see the 'anatta-ness' of all dhammas. In particular, she was discussing anantara paccaya or proximity condition to point out how the understanding of the namas and rupas which follow each other can lead to less clinging to 'Adelaide' as something or some situation. If there is more awareness that the kilesa also are not self, there will be less clinging to self. She pointed out that 'by not developing awareness whenever kilesa arises, the kilesa can rule over other dhammas'. It seems obvious, and we know so well in theory what reality is and what awareness is and yet so often seem to be back at square one!

We talked about the danger of having a fixed idea of one's tendencies which Jonothan has often pointed out to me. We had some discussion of this in the area of work situations. Some of us seem to find it harder than others to cope with what seem like unreasonable demands, and feel we need to make a point of showing how the tasks we are given are unreasonable. We often want to be noticed and not forgotten as a 'nobody'. We might know that this isn't always helpful, but nonetheless we think it's our way and we cannot live like the person who is happy to keep quiet, do his best and not worry about the situation. In a sense it's true, there are different tendencies. Yet, at the same time as I say that it's my way and I can't help shouting out, there is some understanding deep down that understanding of kusala can develop and can begin to make life easier. We forget that it is the thinking of ourself, making ourself important, mana or conceit about the outcome of our work, instead of just doing what we can, that makes life difficult at these times.

Jonothan and I have discussed a lot together and with others how we cannot always follow or live up to our own standards because we often work for those with different standards. Alan gave the example of playing a part in a television series and not being given enough time to prepare one's part. Another example discussed was

that of a teacher whose school's policy may be inconsistent with the teacher's idea of what is best for the students. Khun Sujin pointed out that one should consider why and for whom one is performing or doing one's job. Is it often our own ideas or ideals that we are more concerned to carry out?

The subject of mana also came up in respect of social situations where there can be degrees of comparison with those we already know and like well. Maybe the people we now find ourselves amongst do not understand so much, or are not as easy to talk to as other friends. Khun Sujin talked about 'following life with sati'. This is another way of describing how there should be more awareness and understanding of the uninvited guests through different doorways. Instead of comparing or thinking of another situation, one can learn to follow what is conditioned already, and develop sati. If one is in a hectic work situation or feels one is being torn in too many directions, as I suggested I'd felt, what can one do? Panic and worry obviously don't help.

Of course it sounds very easy when Khun Sujin says 'just follow with sati'. I started thinking or worrying about the same situations arising when I would return to Adelaide. She suggested 'cutting the story' with sati. A moment of awareness which is aware of thinking as thinking can help to make the story a little shorter each time. If there is more consideration for others, what we are used to thinking of as the unpleasant situations can slowly become pleasant.

It's so obvious that real happiness in life is not a matter of following the objects of our attachment but helping to make others happy and fitting in with what they would like. Yet, even though we've heard this and it seems clear at the time, it's still such a change of direction that it's only gradually obvious on more than a theoretical level.

Khun Sujin suggested that we should be more natural, that I should be more myself in different situations. I pointed out that it was the kilesa which seemed natural. We have to learn to be ourselves with kusala and to understand more about the real independence; not depending on anything other than the development of understanding.

Finally, while we were in Bangkok, Jonothan was asked what advice he would give, as someone who had recently got married, to someone thinking of this possibility. This is perhaps incidental to the main summary. I was rather apprehensive about what he might say as we had spent a large part of the day before discussing various problem areas with Khun Sujin! His advice was of course very cautionary. We had some general discussion about helpful conditions and reasons to consider for getting married. Obviously if one does find oneself living with another, the more help and support there is for the development of understanding and kusala in general and the more concern for the other's well-being as opposed to concern for oneself, the happier life will be.

In this sense, there is nothing new, and I think we all agreed that it is dangerous to see marriage, or any other situation, as an escape from any difficulties. Sometimes one thinks that one is prepared to give up a lot for someone one really cares for; but if it's a matter of giving up our kilesa- and as we know, it's not so easy when it's a matter of giving up the objects of our

cont.

attachment - I'm not sure we're very interested in this.

We were discussing generally the problems some people have in marriage. Khun Sujin was suggesting that when taking some course of action in this respect - whether getting married or separating - one needed to think of the long-term as well as what would seem to make oneself and the other happy at the present time.

I often say that the goal of my life or that the main priority in my life is the development of understanding of Dhamma and that giving support in this area was a main reason for me to marry. Perhaps with more understanding and honesty, one is more careful about such assertions and certainly at times when one's life seems so riddled with kilesa that it seems to be all one can do to keep head above water, there are conditions to question whether the priority in one's life is as one says. We discussed this point with Khun Sujin also, and she (very patiently) reminded us that we cannot help having 'attachment and aversion and everything, but by being firm on the idea or concept that what we like most of all is the developing of understanding, it (the understanding) helps whenever it comes, because it will help to have less attachment and aversion, instead of just wanting to be happy and have the situation at will... Whatever appears as anattā can condition right understanding with awareness. Then one will enjoy everything in one's life, because it (the understanding of everything in one's life) can bring the understanding further instead of wishing to have steady pleasant feeling all the time, or all good things in life.'

Sarah Abbott

with Jon's help